

Competitive Intelligence and the Formulation of Marketing Strategy

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Competitive Intelligence and the Formulation of Marketing Strategy

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Introduction

The area of competitive intelligence (CI) and its working relationship with marketing strategy formulation (MSF) has received limited in-depth research. Previous reports and studies on this relationship have largely ignored the contribution which CI can make to MSF. This is partly because managers and academics themselves, have not yet identified the relationship. It is also extremely rare to find evidence of any investigative study looking at this aspect of CI within European companies.

This paper reports on the first and only CI Doctoral study to be completed in the UK to date. The focus of the research was designed to fill the gap in current knowledge on the '*Role of Competitive Intelligence in the Formulation of Marketing Strategy*'. An overview of this work is reported here, providing the salient findings from the empirical study. More detailed papers from this 390 page thesis are planned and will be published in due course.

Central to the objectives of the study were issues of the current state of CI in European companies, whether a relationship between CI and MSF existed at all and if so, how CI contributed to the marketing strategy process.

Such focus had been decided upon after an extensive literature review revealed the gap. A highly satisfactory questionnaire survey was followed with semi-structured, face-to-face and telephone interviews with a number of CI practitioners. Hypothesis testing with data from the survey was used, as well as exploratory and descriptive techniques based on findings from the semi-structured interviews.

This was subsequently extended into a discussion in terms of theoretical implications for advancing the study of the relationship between CI and MSF. Identification of the managerial implications were thus possible and recommendations were made for improving the relationship between competitive intelligence and marketing managers in European companies.

Practical Marketing Strategy

It is difficult to find a hard and fast definition of marketing strategy, whether from literature on the subject, or from executives in the business arena who are familiar with the practice. Therefore, it is perhaps best to define marketing strategy by describing its components. Formulating marketing strategy is part and parcel of the corporate strategic planning of the company. It consists of four major stages:-

- Setting Marketing Objectives
- Strategic Marketing Analysis
- Strategic Decision Making and
- Implementation and Control.

However, much of the literature deals with these components in isolation and fails to relate them either conceptually or in practice.

The importance of understanding the internal and external business environment when developing competitive strategies is well recognised and various tools are available in this regard. However, the fast changing business environment and the globalisation of competition has resulted in the need for companies to better understand the impact and consequences of these changes on *their* position in the market. It has also highlighted the need for firms to be able to make the necessary adjustments in marketing practices and strategic planning, in order for the company to develop and maintain competitive advantage. Consequently, enlightened companies have recognised the importance of CI as an essential tool in providing the intelligence needed for decision makers in the company.

The importance of good practice in CI has been widely acknowledged, yet it often goes unnoticed in management practice. This research indicated that the need for CI is growing rapidly. Findings from this study highlighted both encouraging and worrying signs regarding the practice of CI among European CI managers who are seeking a clear and practical set of guidelines to help them in carrying out their job. Their problem lies in the fact that most of the literature available on the subject of CI is still highlighting the importance of 'why', which those who participated in this research already fully understood. It was evident that they lacked the knowledge in 'how' to carry out their CI activities and 'how' the most common problems could be overcome to gain maximum benefit. It is clear from this research that the practice of CI in Europe requires a great deal of commitment in order to improve the current status. It is also clear that companies recognised the need for CI, methods and activities but found it difficult to use them to their full potential to gain maximum benefit.

The following section discusses the sample frame, some of the findings and the implications of such, with regard to the current state of CI in European firms, and the contribution which CI activities can make to the formulation of marketing strategy.

Sample Frame

The objective of the research was to provide a picture of CI and MSF. To this end, members of the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP) in Europe provided the opportunity to gain knowledge about CI across a range of industries and company sizes. An underlying assumption was that the respondents selected would at least be aware of CI and this was confirmed by the responses gained.

After contacting SCIP headquarters in the US, permission was granted to use the names in the member directory. Attendance lists from the SCIP Europe Conference 1998, 2000 and 2001 also allowed access to a list of interested parties.

Despite the nature of the study and the argument that managers have a negative response toward questions dealing with intelligence activities, a satisfying response rate of 251 usable returns from 806 contacts, (31.1%) was achieved. Follow up face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews were held with 23 CI managers who had indicated their willingness to participate in further discussion.

Profile of Respondents' Firms

The largest response was from the manufacturing sector with services companies being well represented. Both sectors showed strong evidence of reacting quickly and competitively to the increased pressures on developing and maintaining a competitive advantage.

A view was required on firm size and of the total respondents, 70.5% were from companies with over 1000 employees. Moreover, 57% of respondents worked in firms with a turnover of over £1 billion.

This would tend to suggest that CI is the domain of larger firms although there was good representation in the smaller size and turnover categories. It might be possible to conclude that smaller companies are less likely to have the extra resources to invest heavily in CI and as such, are less able to practice it. However, they clearly have an interest in CI even if they are not yet fully engaged in the practice.

The pharmaceutical and chemical sector accounted for 21% of respondents, closely followed by industrial products and telecommunications with 19.4%. Another indication of recent market changes was the large number of consumer products firms and also those in the energy and utilities sector which have, in recent years, moved from public to private ownership.

Managerial Implications

The implications discussed in this section are not meant to generalise the research findings to deliver a set of 'universal truths'. Rather, the goal is to add to the understanding by academics, business executives and CI managers which will provide some practical pointers for improved approaches to the practices of CI and to the integration of CI activities into strategic decision making. In this sense, the potential value in the discussion is not in providing the business practitioners with a list of 'what to do', but a valid foundation and direction for them to search for 'the best to do' in their own specific context.

The following two sections discuss the implications of the findings with regard to, firstly, 'The Current Status of CI in European Companies' and secondly, 'The Contribution of Competitive Intelligence Activities to the Marketing Strategy Formulation Process'.

The Current State of CI in European Companies

With regard to what companies actually call the activity of gathering and analysing information about competitors, the results of this research were encouraging. Over half of the respondents called such activities '*Competitive Intelligence*'. The main implication of this is that these firms recognise the importance of CI and as such, are more likely to value its contribution. This credibility is very important in order for CI managers to carry out their job, and also gives greater recognition of their role within the company. However, many companies called such activities a different name other than '*Competitive Intelligence*'. This result is worrying as it indicates that some companies do not fully understand or recognise CI for the role it has in developing competitive advantage. This makes the job of the CI manager more difficult as other managers may not be able to recognise the CI role and hinder the communication process between departments.

In respect of the main reasons why European CI managers undertake CI activities, the most common reason was that it helped the strategic planning process. This is very encouraging, as this result indicates that many European companies are using their CI activities in strategic planning which gives both long-term and short-term benefit. However, '*identify new customer requirements*' was bottom of their list of options offered for using CI. This would suggest that too many companies failed to recognise the importance of satisfying customer needs and requirements. Meeting customer needs is vital for the survival of all firms. Failing to recognise this, typically allows the entrance of a competitor product or service which does satisfy customer needs. Firms which neglect their customers, will inevitably experience product obsolescence, price attacks, profit warnings, share loss and market turmoil.

When asked what were the reasons why companies undertake CI activities, 4 participants from the semi-structured interviews study and 2 participants in the questionnaire study indicated that they don't know why they undertake CI. The 4 respondents from the interviews went on to clarify that they only undertook CI because their senior managers told them to. The implication of this is that these managers are more likely to fail at carrying out CI duties due to a lack of the basic understanding of why such a process should be carried out in the first place. This also implies that if they do not understand why they are doing it, they will certainly not be able to carry it out properly, or achieve maximum benefit. Failure in this process will mean another bad experience of CI, which encourages the mistaken view that CI has no significant value to the firm. Competitive Intelligence is no different from any other activity within a firm. There are good and bad CI Managers. Equally there are good and bad Personnel Managers, good and bad Production Managers and good and bad Brand Managers. It would be very foolish indeed to conclude that on the basis of the manager's ability, rests a decision on the value of the activity.

With regard to the attitudes of European senior managers about CI in their companies, the majority of the respondents were either '*undecided*' or '*don't know*' as to their senior managers' attitude about CI in their company. Many participants in the semi-structured interview study expressed the view that the lack of support from senior managers was the main barrier to the development of CI in their company. They felt that it was very difficult for them to promote CI in the firm as they had little authority. Support from senior managers would have been welcomed in their effort to overcome this barrier. Others stressed that the culture and politics, which existed within the organisation prevented them from getting the necessary support to improve their job. A senior manager in a leading pharmaceutical company who also happened to be in charge of CI activities highlighted one good example of the importance of senior managers' support for CI. This company had a well-established department with 9 full time staff working in the area of CI. As the CI manager was also the senior strategic planning manager he had the authority to make sure that everyone in the company understood the importance of CI and what was required of them in order to help the CI department function effectively. When this manager was asked how he made people aware of CI in his company, he replied "All managers in our company are aware of the CI department, therefore I do not need to do anything". This shows that the support of the senior management is vital in promoting and supporting CI in the company. If the senior managers show enthusiasm and support for CI activities they will help CI staff to be more effective by creating a more productive environment within which they can carry out their duties and gain the maximum benefits.

On looking at the tools/systems used to acquire, access, store and share CI, the majority of respondents indicated that 'database' and 'secure intranet' were the most common tools and systems used to carry out these tasks. This is encouraging as it suggests that some companies are investing in such systems in order to help and improve the CI process in their companies. However, even though companies are investing in such tools, there are still many problems facing CI managers concerning this issue. Participants in the semi-structured interviews expressed concerns that even though their firms had such systems in place, other senior managers still relied heavily on the CI manager to provide even the most simple items of intelligence. Although this intelligence was already available on the in-house systems the senior manager was still reluctant to access it directly. One of the participants in the semi-structured interviews pointed out that *'it would be more efficient if people in our company used the secure intranet more'*. The implication being that in many companies, CI staff carry out the most basic of tasks when ultimately the entire purpose of investing in such a system is to grant all members of staff access, in order to obtain the intelligence they need. As a result, CI staff waste a lot of time doing jobs which could easily be carried out by a researcher or librarian. This compromises their time and takes them away from doing the job they should be doing, namely, working on the information collected, assessing its strategic value and transforming it into meaningful and actionable intelligence.

Regarding the techniques used to analyse CI, the result of the research indicates that CI managers mainly use SWOT analysis and Competitor Profiling for CI analysis. It also indicated that they are less likely to use STEP/PEST analysis, war gaming/role playing and win/lose analysis. This result was further supported by the opinions of the semi-structured interviewees. They explained that the main reason for only using SWOT analysis was due to their limited knowledge of other techniques. This is a very worrying issue because if they limit the techniques they use, this in turn, limits the power of the intelligence they obtain. In certain situations SWOT analysis may not be the most suitable technique to use, however the CI manager may have no knowledge of other techniques and as a result the intelligence generated loses its power. The inevitable conclusion which has to be drawn from this is that some CI managers are not carrying out their job in the most effective way.

When it comes to measuring the effectiveness of CI activities, it is important to emphasise that this is probably the most visible, but potentially the most difficult, task that a CI Manager has to perform. It is nevertheless, a vital step in improving the status of CI within the firm. Measurement highlights:-

- How well or how poorly CI managers carry out their job
- Potential areas of weakness and/or threat to CI activity
- Areas which require effort and commitment to improve the performance of CI
- Areas where CI can contribute to company performance and success
- Areas where CI can deliver tangible results.

All of which can, in turn, promote the profile of CI within the company and prove that company investment in CI is justified.

The result of this research indicates that the majority of respondents used '*action taken*' and '*market share improvements*' as being the main type of measure used to assess the effectiveness of CI. The problem with using market share improvement as a performance measure is that it is very difficult to prove that an increase in market share is due to CI activity alone. Many other elements can be major contributory factors such as: new product development, promotion and advertising campaigns, price cuts, investment in sales staff, exit or acquisition of a key competitor and a whole host of other tactical and strategic moves which all deliver a similar result. Having said that, CI activity is well placed to predict the timeliness of such activity, or prepare the firm for a defence against competitor attack. Therefore, failure to use suitable measures to highlight the effectiveness and benefits of CI activity may result in the loss of credibility of the CI profile.

Another issue which is a cause for concern was the 9 participants from the semi-structured interviews and 17 respondents from the questionnaire who admitted that they did not know how to measure the effectiveness of CI activities in their companies and as a natural consequence, cannot communicate their successes to senior managers, in terms which they understand or expect.

Failure to deal with any weaknesses and failure to highlight the benefits of CI will ultimately reduce its credibility. Therefore it is essential that all CI managers are able to effectively measure their CI performance on a continuous basis and to deal with any criticism, if and when it arises. By doing this they will increase the effectiveness of their CI activities and the end result will be improved company performance.

The Contribution of CI Activities to the MSF Process

Marketing strategy formulation aims to establish, build, defend and maintain competitive advantage. This requires extensive analysis of both the internal and external environments and a mixture of useful intelligence. It also requires managers to deal with issues that involve a high degree of uncertainty and vagueness. Therefore, MSF requires a substantial amount of hard and soft intelligence. The respondents in this study indicated that while they understood the importance, benefits and need for CI in the MSF process, their main problem was in '*how*' to integrate CI into MSF.

It was encouraging to note that 87% of respondents felt that CI helped strategic planning and that this was the reason for engagement. The second most cited reason was to '*develop new marketing strategy*' followed by '*awareness*'.

The overall result of this study indicated that CI managers believed that CI often contributed to strategic analyses and strategic decision making. They also believed that CI '*sometimes*' contributed to setting marketing objectives, implementation and control.

In the following section, some guidelines are drawn as to how CI contributes to each stage of MSF.

Stage One: Setting Marketing Objectives

This is a key stage in MSF. Marketing objectives are what the company wishes to achieve in the future, normally expressed as market share, profit or some other agreed performance measure. Managers utilise their judgement and experience to set these and examine the feasibility of each in light of market conditions.

When asked how CI contributed to setting market objectives, 77.5% of the total respondents stated that CI contributed by *'understanding competitors' strategies and objectives'*, followed by 77% who felt that *'providing useful intelligence, which helps to set achievable, realistic marketing objectives'* was relevant. *'Providing intelligence that can be a platform to develop marketing objectives'* was cited by 59%. One worrying result from this study was that 7.6% of respondents and 34% of the participants in the semi-structured interviews stated that they *'don't know'* how CI contributes to setting marketing objectives. The implication of this result is that these managers will be reluctant to use CI at this stage of MSF and if they do use it they will not be doing so effectively.

Stage Two: Strategic Analysis

When respondents were asked to state how CI contributed to marketing strategy analysis, 70% stated that CI contributed by *'helping to better understand the business environment'*. Intelligence on *'aspects of the competitive environment'* was considered important by 65.2%. In addition, over 50% thought that CI helped managers to *'identify opportunities in the market'*, *'anticipate competitors' moves'*, *'add value to analysis'* and *'provide a clear understanding of the market'*.

All respondents agreed that CI had some contribution to this stage. However, 2.1% of survey respondents and 19% of interviewees stated that they *'don't know'* how CI contributes to strategic analysis. The implication of this is that if companies are not using CI in the analysis stage of MSF, then they will fail to develop a strategy which takes full account of the competitive terrain.

CI at this stage focuses on decision structuring, data gathering, recovery and analysis. CI can be used to collect and process relevant marketing information and transform this information to meaningful intelligence. CI can be used to analyse market share, market trends, target markets and competitor activity. Further, CI can offer intelligent advice on how to use the relevant marketing theoretical models properly. CI can be used to better understand shifting customer needs and market volatility. Scenario testing is improved, as are predictions of growth rates, market trends, competitor action and market response.

Other strategic analysis methods and models which would be suitable for strategic analysis are; key success factors, competitor profiling, financial analysis, industry analysis, win/lose analysis, war gaming and role playing. However, it is important to point out that using a single strategic analysis technique for all situations is easy, but foolhardy. Any analytical tool will highlight just a small part of the strategic problem, and all have their benefits and limitations. Thus, it is necessary to '*mix and match*'. Skilled and professional CI analysts bring a high degree of flexibility in approach to a situation, along with a deep understanding of the purpose and problems of the many frameworks available for dealing with the complexity of strategic analysis. This supports what was stated previously that CI managers must be fully aware of all the techniques available and they must know how each one can be used to maximise the benefit of strategic analysis. It is clear the proactive practice of CI can only assist with this stage.

Stage Three: Strategic Decision Making

Analysis is just one step towards strategic decision making but detailed analysis is crucial in laying a firm foundation for such decision making. This stage makes assumptions and forecasts the future positions of products and markets. Relevant analytical methods include forecasting, risk assessment and 'what-if' analysis. It is the time when all-important decisions are made.

Respondents were asked to state the top three ways that CI contributed to strategic decision making. Up-to-date intelligence regarding the business environment which clearly helps managers to make their decisions was stated by 80.6% whilst 65.5% stated that it helped them to assess and evaluate likely competitor reaction. Significantly, 61.7% felt that CI provided intelligence and suggestions to senior managers. Only one respondent believed that '*CI could never be applied to the strategic decision making stage*'. All agreed that CI had some contribution to make to this stage.

Aside from gaining expert knowledge and enlightening assumptions made on performance, CI can be utilised to predict strategic factor changes and the threats to products, markets and the competitive position.

At the end of the decision making stage, a selection is required regarding strategic priorities. The chosen strategy(ies) should be built on competitive advantage and sustainability. CI provides relevant intelligence and analytical techniques to answer the 'what-if' and 'so-what' questions. CI informs on the validity of expert advice and also helps managers to think strategically. CI and strategic analysis has to work together to examine the planned strategies against unintentional biases.

Stage Four: Implementation and Control

The decision as to which strategy(ies) to follow is not the final stage of CI's contribution to MSF. Some managers can devise the best theoretical strategy but if it cannot be implemented the strategy will be useless. The subsequent waste of time and effort would be hard to defend. Implementation of any strategy is one of the most vital stages to success and it is not a stage which is carried out and then forgotten.

Continual re-assessment and feedback is used so that adjustments can be made. One CI manager from the semi-structured interviews supported this by saying *"It is not just a case of saying 'this is our strategy, thank you very much,' CI's contribution to implementation and control should be an ongoing process which evolves continuously. Any strategy which just stands still will die"*.

When respondents were asked to state the top three ways that CI contributed to the implementation of marketing strategy, 60.8% said that indicators from CI are used as an *'early warning system'* to assess success or failure. 53.7% stated that CI provided *'information about competitors' reaction to marketing strategy'*, and 42.7% stated that *'checking the validity of the strategy'* was important.

However, nearly 6% of the respondents believed that CI *'never'* contributed to the implementation and control stage of the MSF process. The implication of this is that some CI managers do not understand the importance of using the intelligence derived from CI activities in this stage. This results in CI managers not being able to use performance feedback in the design of future CI activity which could result in companies obtaining intelligence at too late a stage, when adjustments may not be possible.

A further concern was that 18% of respondents and 26% of interviewees stated that they *'don't know'* how CI contributes to the implementation stage of MSF. The implication of this is that some CI managers do not recognise implementation to be a vital stage and therefore they will not be aware of the need to continuously monitor and adjust their strategies accordingly. The end result will be ineffective implementation of the strategy which will, in turn, lead to ineffective performance.

This also throws into doubt the use of CI for those firms in trying to assess competitor reaction to any strategy they might wish to implement. CI's unique strength as an early warning system is thus weakened and, potentially, impotent.

Conclusions

The number of respondents who participated in this research was encouraging and provided original, valuable and illuminating insights into the practices of CI in MSF by European companies. It also reflected the respondents' enthusiasm that CI and MSF were being researched. Several comments were received that apart from the previous work undertaken by members of the Competitive Intelligence and Marketing Strategy Team (CIMS) at Leicester Business School, nobody had shown much interest in how CI was practised in European firms. Indeed past contacts through previous studies was valuable in securing further contact with key individuals and their enthusiasm to participate was infectious.

It could be argued that the focus on the tactical use of CI suggested that few companies are taking a longer-term strategic view of CI, but conversely, it could be that tactical actions are more easily identified, more regularly reported and easier to measure. The pre-occupation within many European firms on profit, contribution and other financial measures of success does not help.

Therefore, in order to offer enhanced support to the MSF process, the strengths of CI must be well integrated into each stage of the process and its contribution well understood. It is clear from all sources that CI is not only useful but also critical to the design of realistic, achievable and successful marketing strategy. The benefits of familiar tried and tested techniques and models of strategic development can be maximised, but a competitive advantage can only come if CI is seen as part and parcel of the overall strategic process, not just a 'nice to have' add-on activity.

About the Authors

Ahmad Badr

Ahmad is a Lecturer and Researcher in CI and Marketing Strategy at Leicester Business School, De Montfort University and is also a member of the CIMS Team. He holds a BSc from Beirut Arab University, Lebanon, and an MSc Strategic Marketing from Leicester Business School. Ahmad was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree by the University for his thesis on 'The Role of CI in the Formulation of Marketing Strategy', the first successful Doctoral study in the UK to focus on CI.

He is the initiator of several research projects and is on the supervisory team of additional Doctoral studies. He is also the author of a comparative study of CI practice between US and UK firms. With Sheila Wright and David Pickton, Ahmad is now developing his ideas, paradigms and strategic frameworks which will assist Managers wishing to incorporate CI into their strategic planning process. Ahmad is also an Academic Editorial Board member for the Journal of Competitive Intelligence and Management.

Drawing on his industrial experience as a Marketing Manager for several international companies, Ahmad is able to illustrate the practicalities of implementing CI and Marketing Strategy plans.

Sheila Wright

Sheila is a Principal Lecturer at Leicester Business School, De Montfort University where she leads the CI and Marketing Strategy (CIMS) Teaching and Research Team. She holds an MBA from the University of Warwick, the Professional Diploma in Management from the Open University and was one of the first Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) members to be awarded Chartered Marketer status. She is an Academic Editorial Board member and Regional Editor (Europe) for the Journal of Competitive Intelligence and Management. Numerous research projects have been undertaken under Sheila's supervision, the most significant being Ahmad Badr's PhD study.

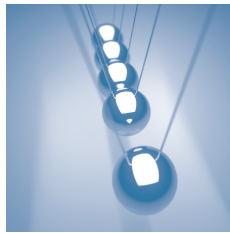
Sheila's work has been published in Marketing Intelligence and Planning, European Journal of Marketing, R & D Management, Journal of Marketing and Comportamento Organizacional e Gestao. She is also author of 'The Financial Times Marketing Casebook' first edition, published by Pitman. In 2003 she was invited by the Sunday Times to speak on 'Competitive Intelligence for Business Development' for their Enterprise Network Conference Series which attracted 400 delegates. During her 20 years of industrial experience, Sheila has worked on all aspects of company growth and performance. This provided valuable experience of business development, organic growth, mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances. She has been responsible for the setting up and development of CI units and is fully aware of the practical problems facing managers wishing to capitalise on CI. She has worked on international projects in Turkey, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, France, South Africa and the USA.

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